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## AIMS AND PRINCIPLES OF THE CONSUMERS' LEAGUE.

THE underlying principles of the Consumers' League are few and simple. They are partly economic and partly moral.

The first principle of the league is universality. It recognizes the fact that in a civilized community every person is a consumer. From the cradle (which may be of wood or of metal, with rockers or without them) to the grave (to which an urn may be preferred), throughout our lives we are choosing, or choice is made for us, as to the disposal of money. From the newsboy who fosters the cigarette and chewing-gum trades, and is himself fostered by our failure to give the preference to some one-armed father of a family in the purchase of our papers, to the self-conscious patrons of the Kelmscott sheets, we all make daily and hourly choice as to the bestowal of our means. As we do so, we help to decide, however unconsciously, how our fellow-men shall spend their time in making what we buy. Few of us can give much in charity; giving a tithe is, perhaps, beyond the usual custom. But whatever our gifts may be, they are less decisive for the weal or woe of our fellows than are our habitual expenditures. For a man is largely what his work makes him — an artist, an artisan, a handicraftsman, a drudge, a sweaters' victim, or, scarcely less to be pitied, a sweater. All these and many more classes of workers exist to supply the demand that is incarnate in us and our friends and fellow-citizens.

Those of us who enjoy the privilege of voting may help, once or twice in a year, to decide how the tariff, or the currency, or the local tax rate shall be adjusted to our industries. But all of us, all the time, are deciding by our expenditures what industries shall survive at all, and under what conditions. Broadly stated, it is *the* aim of the National Consumers' League to moralize this decision, to gather and make available information which may enable all to decide in the light of knowledge, and to appeal to the conscience, so that the decision when made shall be a righteous one.

The Consumers' League, then, acts upon the proposition that the consumer ultimately determines all production, since any given article must cease to be produced if all consumers ceased to purchase it, as in the case of the horsehair furniture of the early part of the century, which has now virtually ceased to be manufactured; while, on the other hand, any article, however injurious to human life and health the conditions of its production may be, or with whatsoever risk they may be attended, continues to be placed on the market so long as there is an effective demand for it; *e. g.*, nitro-glycerine, phosphorus, matches, and mine products of all kinds.

While, however, the whole body of consumers determine, in this large way and in the long run, what shall be produced, the individual consumer has, at the present time, for want of organization and technical knowledge, no adequate means of making his wishes felt, of making his demand an effective demand. Illustrations of the truth of this proposition are plentiful in the experience of everyone.

A painful type of the ineffectual consumer may be found in the colony of Italian immigrants in any one of our great cities. These support at least one store for the sale of imported macaroni, vermicelli, sausage (Bologna and other sorts), olive oil, Chianti wine, and Italian cheese and chestnuts. These articles are all excessively costly, by reason of transportation charges and the import duties involved; but the immigrants are accustomed to using them, and they prefer a less quantity of these kinds of foods rather than a greater abundance of the cheaper

and more accessible supplies by which they are surrounded. The pitiful result is that the importer buys the least quantity of the real Italian product requisite for the purpose of admixture with American adulterants. The most flagrant example of this is, perhaps, the use of Italian olive oil, of which virtually none, really pure, is placed upon the market, for sale at retail. What the Italian immigrants really get is the familiar Italian label, the well-known package with contents tasting more or less as they used to taste at home in Italy. What the actual ingredients may be they know as little as we know when we place our so-called maple syrup, or our so-called butter, or honey, on our hot cakes at a hotel in the city. The demand of the Italians in America for Italian products, although large, persistent, and maintained at a heavy sacrifice on the part of the purchasers, is not an effective demand, because the immigrants have neither the knowledge nor the organization wherewith to enforce it.

That knowledge alone, without organization, is not sufficient to create an effective demand is well illustrated by the experience of a conscientious shopper of my acquaintance in Chicago. Deeply stirred by an eloquent appeal in behalf of the sweaters' victims and their sufferings, she determined to free her own conscience by buying only goods made in factories. She began her search for such goods in the great leading department store in which she had always fitted out her boys for school. The salesman assured her that "All our goods are made in our own factory; we handle no sweatshop goods." She, being a canny person and well instructed, asked for the written assurance of that fact, signed by a member of the firm, to be sent home with the goods. They were never sent, though this was an excellent customer whom the firm was in the habit of obliging if possible. This process she repeated in several stores and outfitting establishments, until it became clear to her mind that she could not free her conscience alone and unaided. Her plight well illustrates the case of the individual consumer, enlightened but unorganized and, therefore, ineffectual.

The purchaser who is able and willing to pay for the best that the market affords is apt to think that, whatever the sorrows

of purchasers of ready-made goods, he is safe, because he gets his garments only of the merchant tailor and pays a high price for the assurance that they are made up under conditions which guard him against disease, and enable the merchant to pay the working tailor a fair price for his labor. But this customer is really no better off than the Italian colony or the well-instructed but ineffectual club woman making her search for righteously made ready-made wares. For example: When I was factory inspector of Illinois, I was one day in search of a cigarmaker who was said to have smallpox in his family, during the terrible epidemic of 1894. Quite by accident I happened upon a tailor newly moved into the suspected house, and not yet registered either with the local board of health or with my department. In this tailor's shop, which was his dwelling, there was a case of smallpox. In the same shop there was, also, a very good overcoat, such as gentlemen were paying from \$60 to \$75 for in that year. In the collar of the coat was a hang-up strap bearing the name of the leading merchant tailor of Helena, Mont. Now, that merchant tailor had had, in his plate-glass window, samples of excellent cloth, from which the customer had ordered his coat. The tailor had taken the measurements and telegraphed them, together with the sample number of the cloth, to the great wholesale house in Chicago of which he was the agent. The wholesaler had had the coat cut, and had sent it to the tailor in whose sickroom in an infectious tenement house it was subsequently found. But for the happy accident of our finding that tailor while looking for an entirely different person, the hapless customer in Helena, Mont., would surely have bought smallpox germs with his expensive garment. Essentially, the position of this purchaser did not differ materially from that of the Italian immigrants; like them he was paying a price which entitled him to get clean goods; like them he had neither technical knowledge nor organization to make his demand effective.

Besides his fatuous belief that his custom work, because it is costly, is made under clean conditions, the purchaser of costly garments usually comforts his soul with the assumption that the working tailor who makes them receives some substantial share

of the high price in the form of wages. While it is true that the Brotherhood of Tailors ordinarily commands better wages, by reason of their strong organization, than workmen in the ready-made branches, it is nevertheless true that the tailor in this case, as in scores of others known to me, was driven by extreme poverty to conceal the dreadful fact that he had smallpox in his family, through fear of losing a few days' or a few weeks' work. So the high price of his coat did not even entitle the customer in Helena, Mont., to an easy conscience on the score of wages.

It is sometimes questioned whether, in spite of the special cases set forth, and the evils which they typify, it is not true that in a general way the laws protect the purchaser, and the producer bends all his energies to meet the consumers' wishes; so that another organization in these organization-ridden times might seem to be superfluous. These are really two questions, and must be answered separately.

First, as to the producer, and his effort to meet the wishes of the consumer. It is true that every manufacturer studies the market; he is constrained, if he would succeed in his business, to calculate, infer, guess, from the action of the buyer of last year, yesterday, and today, to the action of the buyer of tomorrow and next year. The failure of an enormous percentage of manufacturers shows how difficult is this task of inference. Recurring crises show that the difficulty is sometimes an insuperable one for the whole body of manufacturers at once. Successful manufacturers approximate to the wants of large bodies of buyers; but the approximation is far from being always satisfactorily close. How few of our ready-bound books are just as we like to have them; or of our ready-made shoes, or other garments! Bakers' bread is a classical example of ready-made food intended to suit the "average" buyer, and really suiting the taste of no one. The difficulties of the manufacturer are greatly intensified by the extraordinary incompetence of the "average" purchaser to judge the desired articles on their merits. What housewife can detect, alone and unaided, the injurious chemicals in her supplies of milk, bread, meat, home

remedies? What young girl selecting silk for her adornment knows that oil-boiled taffeta is more durable than common silk at twice its price; or why it is so? And we all buy our wheels on the reputation of the manufacturer, without any knowledge of the qualities of the rubber, steel, brass, wood, and leather used in making them.

For certain great modern industries men have devised tests of the product; and warships, locomotives, railway bridges, and electrical installations can all be tried and tested before the bills are paid; but for the bulk of the product of present industry nothing effective has been devised corresponding to these tests. Especially is this true of all those branches of manufacture which were once carried on by women in the home, and have now gone out of it into shops and factories. Concerning these products purchasers must rely upon their individual skill as buyers. The old rule, *caveat emptor*, is here carried to its utmost application; and in this connection producers suffer so keenly from the lack of intelligence on the part of consumers that they are actually fitting up museums for the purpose of educating them; of which museums the new Commercial Museum in Philadelphia may be regarded as a promising type.

While, however, the most enlightened and progressive manufacturers are thus approaching their problem along the road of education, the great mass of producers have long had recourse to the more simple device of advertising. This can lay no claim to any educational quality. It is distinctly not meant to educate or instruct, but to stimulate, persuade, incite, entice, and induce the indifferent to purchase. Much of the current advertisement, of which the patent-medicine advertisement may be taken as the type, is directly aimed at the ignorance of the purchaser. Nearly all of it is aimed at the cupidity of the public; and it, therefore, offers cheapness as the one great characteristic. Now, the Consumers' League does not object to that cheapness which is achieved by the introduction of two-, four-, and ten-needle machines, driven by the dynamo, and used for sewing garments cut (144 at once) by the help of the electrical cutter. It does object to that cheapness which is attained by making children

run foot-power machines in tenement kitchens in competition with the electrical installation. It seeks, therefore, to afford information whereby the intending purchaser may test the accuracy of the producer's claim that he is aiming to meet the wishes of the public.

To the producer the league offers that which he needs more than any other one condition of success—a somewhat stable body of customers. In Great Britain, where the coöperative movement has grown slowly to gigantic proportions, the purchasers by pooling their interests have been enabled to employ expert buyers who can stipulate in advance as to conditions of manufacture as well as prices and qualities; and obtain in return for the stable demand which they represent goods produced by manufacturers aware, in advance, of the wishes of this part of their purchasing public. In this country, in the absence of such an organization, supply and demand are left to regulate themselves automatically, ruining in the process large numbers of merchants and manufacturers who guess unsuccessfully as to the wishes of the public, or fail to appeal to it by their offers addressed to its supposed cupidity and credulity, involving us all in the consumption of immense quantities of adulterated goods made in the attempt to approximate the wishes of an unenlightened and unorganized body of purchasers; and driving down below the living point the wages of the weaker portion of the employés who produce and distribute the goods.

The Consumers' League recognizes the fact that this blind guessing, inferring, deducing the wishes of the consumer from his action in the past, while now almost universal in this country, is not inevitable in consequence of any natural or social law. All factory legislation is enacted in recognition of the fact that the human relations of supply and demand are susceptible of beneficent modifications; the coöperative movement is a further witness to the same fact; the Consumers' League, latest comer in this field, aims at still another demonstration of this truth.

As to the second part of the query, whether the consumer is not substantially protected by the laws, and enlightened by the official information afforded under them, in spite of the



individual examples of the lack of power of the single purchaser already adduced, the answer is manifold. One of the most important considerations is the fact that legislation is by no means uniform throughout the states; and the righteous man in Massachusetts, living under the best labor code in this country, enforced by the most vigilant and experienced inspectors of factories, is in as great danger of buying garments made in infectious shops under the sweating system, which is in full blast, and is daily increasing in extent and in intensity in New York city, as was the Montana purchaser from the shops of Chicago. For under the constitution of the United States no one state can forbid the importation of goods made in another state, however far the standard of conditions of manufacture in that state may fall below its own. For the promotion of uniform legislation for the protection of the consumer, if for no other purpose, there seems to be room for the work of the National Consumers' League.

Nor is this all. While the manufacturers are spending millions for the purpose of enticing and persuading buyers, the nation, the states, and the cities are spending their hundreds of thousands of dollars for the purpose of affording to the public information concerning industrial conditions, food adulterations, and various other interests of the buyer. The Department of Labor at Washington, the state bureaus of labor statistics, the state inspectors of factories, the municipal boards of health all publish, annually or biennially (some of them quarterly, monthly, and weekly), information designed for the enlightenment and instruction of the public. But very little of this information has, hitherto, served the purposes of the individual purchaser. If I have read the reports of all these officers, I am not only in as great danger as before of buying glucose for sugar, acetic acid for vinegar, and paper in the soles of my shoes; I am in as great danger as ever of buying smallpox, measles, scarlet fever, infectious sore eyes, and a dozen forms of disease of the skin in my new garments. For not one of these officials publishes the list of the kitchen tailors to whom the merchant tailor gives his goods to be made up; just as not one of them

can possibly give information whereby adulterations of foods can be successfully detected in the private kitchen. There is urgent need for a private society to investigate certain specified branches of industry and list the best establishments in them, guaranteeing the product made under clean and wholesome conditions, using all the information afforded by existing agencies, and continually spurring them on to make this information more specific and practical; thus affording the individual purchaser that available information which, as we have seen, he so sorely lacks.

On the other hand, it may be largely for want of such a volunteer society that the available official information already existing has been, hitherto, largely ineffectual. In vain has the fact been printed that the most fashionable chocolates of the day are made by Italian children whose personal habits are so filthy that physicians, asked to examine them as to their physical fitness under the factory law to work, required the children to bathe, change their clothing, and have their hair cut, before proceeding to the examination. The chocolates are as popular as ever. In vain has the fact been printed that the bouillon so extensively advertised as particularly delicate and suitable for the use of invalids, aged persons, and little children is boiled in such close proximity to the fertilizer storage of the packing establishment that the factory inspectors fall ill on the day of an inspection of the premises. The bouillon continues to be served at the luncheons and dinners of the socially aspiring. In vain is the fact printed year after year that the sweaters and their victims, after working fourteen, eighteen, even twenty hours a day through their "rush" season, starve through a long vacation at their own expense; that consumption, formerly almost unknown among the Russian Jews, is now commonly known as the "tailors' disease," having become distinctly characteristic of the sweaters' victims in consequence of the inhumane conditions of their work. Official statements on all these matters, safely buried in official reports, do not reach and influence the great mass of the buyers.

Incidentally, it is true that the community is likely to enjoy the benefit of a more rigid enforcement of its ordinances and

statutes just in proportion as it coöperates through volunteer agencies with the officials who write these reports; for in the absence of such tangible evidence of the existence of enlightened and organized public opinion, the story of honest officials hounded out of office, of weak ones bribed, and of incompetents retained permanently in place is one of the black chapters of industrial history.

The National Consumers' League acts upon the proposition that, to constitute an effective demand for goods made under right conditions, there must be numbers of consumers sufficiently large to assure purchases steady and considerable enough to compensate for the expense incurred by humane employers. For this purpose the National Consumers' League has established a permanent office in New York city, and has entered upon a systematic work of organization of state leagues in addition to those of New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Illinois which were in existence before it, and themselves constitute it. The National Consumers' League undertakes for the present year to investigate a single sharply defined branch of industry, as an experiment to determine the power of the purchaser when organized for a definite purpose. To manufacturers in that branch — women's white muslin underwear — the National Consumers' League offers the use of its label and the standard on which this rests, and pledges itself to advertise widely and persistently the humane conditions existing in the factories approved by it. The standard adopted for the present embraces four requirements, viz.: that all goods must be manufactured by the manufacturer on his own premises; that all the requirements of the state factory law must be complied with; that no children under sixteen years of age shall be employed; that no overtime shall be worked. It is hoped that within a reasonable time it may be possible to include a requirement as to minimal wages; the four which have been adopted are already realized in the best factories which have been found in the branch of manufacture under consideration.

Since the exodus of manufacture from the home, the one great industrial function of women has been that of the purchaser.

Not only all the foods used in private families, but a very large proportion of the furniture and books, as well as the clothing for men, women, and children, is prepared with the direct object in view of being sold to women. It is, therefore, very natural that the first effort to educate the great body of miscellaneous purchasers concerning the power of the purchaser should have been undertaken by women, among women, on behalf of women and children. Having proved successful, within moderate limits, in that field, it is now extending among people irrespective of age and sex; and is asking the coöperation of the institutions of learning, and of learned societies.

The first effort in this country was made by two ladies, Mrs. Frederick Nathan and Mrs. Charles Russell Lowell, in New York city, in 1890. They selected two stores in which the



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treatment of the employés seemed to them more than usually humane; and, setting forth the good points of those stores as their standard, they wrote to 1,400 storekeepers on Manhattan Island inquiring whether they wished to arrange the work in their stores in conformity with the standard and have their establishments included in a proposed white list. Out of the 1,400 *two* responded favorably; and from that modest beginning has grown the present "White List" of the Consumers' League of New York city, embracing nearly forty leading stores. For the two ladies proceeded to organize their friends; to bring their growing constituency to the attention of the retail merchant; to circulate their White List, and the Standard upon which it is founded; and to educate public opinion as to the power of purchasers to determine the conditions of labor in retail stores. The present principles, object, and Standard of the Consumers' League of New York city are as follows:

## **The Consumers' League of the City of New York.**

### **PRINCIPLES.**

I. That the interest of the community demands that all workers should receive, not the lowest wages, but fair living wages.

II. That the responsibility for some of the worst evils from which wage-earners suffer rests with the consumers who persist in buying in the cheapest market, regardless of how cheapness is brought about.

III. That it is, therefore, the duty of consumers to find out under what conditions the articles which they purchase are produced, and to insist that these conditions shall be at least decent and consistent with a respectable existence on the part of the workers.

IV. That this duty is especially incumbent upon consumers in relation to the products of woman's work, since there is no limit beyond which the wages of women may not be pressed down, unless artificially maintained at a living rate by combinations, either of the workers themselves or of consumers.

### **OBJECT.**

Recognizing the fact that the majority of employers are virtually helpless to improve conditions as to hours and wages, unless sustained by public opinion, by law, and by the action of consumers, the Consumers' League declares its object to be to ameliorate the conditions of the women and children employed in New York city, by helping to form a public opinion which shall lead consumers to recognize their responsibilities, and by other methods.

### **Standard of a Fair House.**

#### **WAGES.**

A fair house is one in which equal pay is given for work of equal value,

irrespective of sex. In the departments where women only are employed, in which the minimum wages are six dollars per week for experienced adult workers, and fall in few instances below eight dollars.

In which wages are paid by the week.

In which fines, if imposed, are paid into a fund for the benefit of the employés.

In which the minimum wages of cash girls are two dollars per week, with the same conditions regarding weekly payments and fines.

### **HOURS.**

A fair house is one in which the hours from 8 A. M. to 6 P. M. (with three-quarters of an hour for lunch) constitute the working day, and a general half-holiday is given on one day of each week during at least two summer months.

In which a vacation of not less than one week is given with pay during the summer season.

In which all overtime is compensated for.

### **PHYSICAL CONDITIONS.**

A fair house is one in which work-, lunch-, and retiring rooms are apart from each other, and conform in all respects to the present sanitary laws.

In which the present law regarding the providing of seats for saleswomen is observed, and the use of seats permitted.

### **OTHER CONDITIONS.**

A fair house is one in which humane and considerate behavior toward employés is the rule.

In which fidelity and length of service meet with the consideration which is their due.

In which no children under fourteen years of age are employed.

The Consumers' League of New York city, dealing exclusively with the stores on Manhattan Island, made its appeal exclusively to the conscience of the purchasers. Asking them to give the preference to the stores in the White List, it stated its purpose of encouraging humane employers to continue in their course, and of inducing others to imitate them. The success attending that appeal has encouraged the league to enter upon its more extended field of action; and, incidentally, to broaden the scope of its appeal. The National Consumers' League asks that purchasers, by insisting upon buying goods bearing its label, will discriminate in favor of those manufacturers who treat their employés humanely, so far as that is possible under the conditions of the competitive system; and that they will do so both for the sake of the employés and also for the sake of promoting that form of manufacture which is most wholesome for the whole community, in preference to conditions in which danger of spreading infection is constant and considerable. The appeal is still, as before, on behalf of the employé; but it is, also, on behalf of a far larger constituency—the whole purchasing public.

For, clearly, it is also a social duty to promote that form of manufacture which tends toward wholesome products, made under right conditions, rather than the sweatshop with its dangers to the family in which the work is done, and to the purchaser who may buy all the diseases to which reference has been made, despite the glib assurance of the salesman: "All our goods are produced in our own factory."

The present appeal of the National Consumers' League promises to be of increasing value to those employers who care to meet their employés as self-respecting people employed under reasonable conditions, and paid wages in proportion to the value of their work. Many such employers have greeted the league with cordial welcome. One proprietor of a factory, known for forty years as having most carefully selected employés, unusually intelligent, and in surroundings rarely desirable, on being visited by a representative of the National Consumers' League, stated that these were aspects of his factory in which the public had

not seemed to be interested. The proprietors of such factories sustain constant intense pressure of competition of others who have a lower standard; and they need and welcome the offered support of an organized body of purchasers. One practical demonstration of this may be found in the offer of several such employers to use the label of the Consumers' League, bearing the expense of printing the labels and attaching them to the product; another is the help given by a manufacturer of wide experience in drafting the form of contract to be used, and many various designs for the label, from among which the one now in use was selected. As the league grows in numbers and in influence, this moral and financial support to the humane employer may be expected to stimulate the spirit of emulation in others who have hitherto been guided by the desire for cheapness rather than for goodness in the arrangement of their factories. This has been noticeably the effect in New York city, the most enlightened employers having been the first to comply with the requirements of the local league, and others hesitating, some of them for years, but finally coming to the point of making the required concessions.

Recognizing that its work must be one of education and organization, the Consumers' League has sought the coöperation of the great educational institutions. The departments of economics of Harvard, Columbia, the University of Pennsylvania, and Wellesley College have been actively interested in the work of the leagues of their several states. The department of sociology of the University of Chicago has made valuable contributions, both faculty and students helping with tongue and pen the discussion of the power and the duty of the consumer. The American Academy of Political and Social Science has published in its *Annals* the proceedings covering its discussion of the theoretical foundation of the work of the league. The American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the American Social Science Association, at their recent sessions, have discussed the subject;<sup>1</sup> and it will form the subject of one session of the meeting of the American Economic Association at its

<sup>1</sup>The substance of this paper was read at the latter meeting.

coming meeting during the Christmas holidays. The Association of Collegiate Alumnæ, at its October meeting, considered the "New Economics in the Colleges Embraced within this Association," especial importance being attached to the teaching of the theory of consumption. The General Federation of Women's Clubs, at its biennial meeting in June, 1899, gave its principal evening session to the discussion of the principles and aims of the Consumers' League. State federations of women's clubs and individual clubs are asked to take up the subject, placing it on the programs of their public meetings.

In general, the power and usefulness of the Consumers' League will depend largely upon the intelligence and active work of the local organizations, and the degree of coöperation which these succeed in enlisting on the part of the general public. At present the league points out that consumers, even when unorganized, have power to put an end to the production of any given goods by refraining from purchasing them; to promote the production of others by demanding them. When organized, even very partially, consumers can decide, within certain limits, the conditions under which the desired goods shall be produced. Consumers have, however, done none of these things in an orderly and enlightened way, except so far as coöperative buying has been practiced and the adulteration of foods limited by legislation procured through the efforts of purchasers. The power of the purchaser, which is potentially unlimited, becomes great, in practice, just in proportion as purchasers become organized and enlightened, place themselves in direct communication with the producers, inform themselves exactly concerning the conditions of production and distribution, and are able thus to enforce their own will instead of submitting to the enticement and stimulus of the unscrupulous advertising seller.

Briefly stated, by way of résumé, the aim of the National Consumers' League is to organize an effective demand for goods made under right conditions. As means to this end it endeavors:

1. To investigate existing conditions of production, and publish the results of its investigations.



2. To guarantee to the public goods found to have been made under conditions satisfactory to it, by attaching to them its label.

3. To appeal to the conscience of the purchaser as an offset to the continual appeal of advertisers to the credulity and cupidity of the public.

4. To coöperate with and encourage in every legitimate way those employers whose work is done under humane and enlightened conditions.

5. To procure further legislation for the protection of purchasers and employés.

6. To coöperate with the officials whose duty it is to investigate the conditions of production and distribution, or to enforce laws and ordinances dealing with those conditions.

7. To form organizations of purchasers for the purposes above set forth.

FLORENCE KELLEY,

*Secretary National Consumers' League.*